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There appears to be common agreement today that the moral condition of the American culture is not good. Over the past thirty-five years or so, the United States has experienced substantial social regression. A brief glance at a few statistics will illustrate this point.

MORAL MISEDUCATION AND THE DECLINE OF THE AMERICAN CULTURE

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Statement of the Problem

The population of this country has increased about 42 percent since 1960. During this time, there has been more than a 400 percent increase in illegitimate births, a 560 percent increase in violent crime, more than a 200 percent increase in teenage suicides, the divorce rate has quadrupled, and the number of children living in single-parent homes has tripled. Clearly, these are general signs of a major problem.

According to figures from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, in 1965 there were 137 juveniles arrested for violent crimes per 100,000 population. In 1990 that figure jumped to almost 431 per 100,000. In 1960 the teenage suicide rate was 3.6 per 100,000 population. By 1990 it had jumped to 11.3. Cases of child abuse have skyrocketed. In 1976 the reported cases of child abuse was 101 per 10,000 population. By 1991 it had risen to 420 per 10,000.

Let's consider this cultural problem the country is facing in another way. Whereas in 1940 teachers were mainly concerned about talking out of turn in the classroom, gum chewing, making noise, running in the hallway, cutting in line in the cafeteria, and infractions of the dress code, teachers today are more concerned about drug abuse, alcohol abuse, pregnancy, suicide, rape, assault, rob-

bery, and kids carrying guns into school. Clearly, something has changed over the past five decades.

There is little question that the cultural "state of the nation" is bad and getting worse. Society is indeed disintegrating; there are increases in drug abuse, alcohol abuse, child abuse, teen sexual activity, teen pregnancy, teen and adult crime, venereal diseases among all groups, illegitimate children, single-parent households, divorce, and many anti-social behaviors.

Coinciding with these harmful behaviors is a change in attitudes. We are hearing more and more the so-called "abuse excuse" being used by defendants in criminal trials. Basically what this states is "whatever I did, it was not my fault." Responsibility for the behavior is blamed on some other entity including "society," "childhood," "poverty," or some other condition or thing. This may be understandable insofar as no one really seems to want to accept responsibility for one's actions. **What is particularly troublesome is that lately a plethora of so-called psychological and sociological professionals have come forward to promote this attitude of "non-responsibility."**

The Attempts at a Solution

There have been attempts by the government over the past three decades to meet these problems head on and solve them. Between 1960 and 1990 government spending on social concerns has increased more than 500 percent. Spending on welfare has increased 630 percent and spending on education has increased 225 percent. Literally billions of dollars have been spent on a "war on drugs" and a "war on crime." But the situation remains much the same. Clearly, money is not the answer to the problems we face.

The United States has also been in a frenzy about building prisons in an attempt to change behavior. At this time, the country has more people incarcerated in prison than any other industrialized country. During the past few years various state legislatures have passed "three strikes you're out" laws and mandatory sentencing laws. Penalties for all sorts of criminal violations have been increased. But the situation remains much the same. **Clearly, imprisonment, mandatory sentences, and harsher penalties are not the answer to the social problems we face.**

Attempts have been made to curb the social pathologies we are experiencing by implementing a wide range of preventative programs. Among these are such programs as the D.A.R.E. drug

prevention program and the various programs dealing with teen sex and pregnancy. Empirical research has consistently shown that these programs are not working to prevent the behaviors they intended to prevent.

An assortment of political, economic, educational, and social solutions have been proposed and implemented to stem the tide of the present problems facing this nation. So far it is obvious that the proposed solutions haven't worked. The problems are still with us. It would seem sensible to take another comprehensive look at the possible causes or roots of these problems. It would likewise seem sensible to consider some other alternatives than the ones that have been tried and found wanting.

An Analysis of the Causes

It must be stated at the outset that the behavioral problems this society has experienced over the past thirty-five years and continues to experience today do not have a single cause. This has unfortunately been the position of many social theorists and has been the basis for many of the programs which attempted to solve the problems. Yet the research has never shown a single cause that explains anti-social behavior.

The position taken here is that there is no single social, psychological, or economic cause for the anti-social behavior which is tearing this nation apart. There is, moreover, no single social, psychological, or economic solution to the problems. This country can develop and implement all the social and economic programs it wants to. The behavioral problems will remain and probably continue to get worse.

The following points may help to explain why this is so and may shed some light on the "causes" or conditions which have brought about the anti-social behaviors and cultural disintegration we see today. These items are not in any order of importance but are reflections on the current situation and should be discussed with this in mind.

*** In general terms, human behaviors or actions are based on ends and means, values and virtues.** Values and virtues are based on some concept of human nature and the relationship between human beings as human beings and on the individual human being's interplay with things within the environment. **Human behavior involves knowledge and attitudes but these are not enough.** There must also be training in and practice of those be-

haviors deemed "morally good" or "socially acceptable." These behaviors must become a "habit." Children are not born into this world as "good" or "bad." Nor do they come into this world with a knowledge of right and wrong. **That is why proper moral education and training (including practice) are essential.**

* Human behaviors or actions which are deemed to be good or acceptable and the training in and practice of those behaviors is what constitutes what we call "moral education." **Moral education must have some basis upon which it discriminates between "good" behaviors and "bad" behaviors. Otherwise there can be no moral education whatsoever.**

* During the past thirty years or so a philosophy of "ethical relativism" has become the predominate force in this country. Ethical relativism maintains there are no objective standards of human morality and basically reduces moral statements to matters of opinion. The practical consequence of this influence is so-called "situational" or "circumstance" ethics. **The propagation of this "non-morality" has been detrimental to our youth and led to many of the behavior problems we are seeing at the present time.**

* Ethical relativism does talk about "values" but it does not talk about "virtues." Values refer to things while virtues refer to human behaviors or actions. The term "values" can be subjectively justified but the term "virtues" has traditionally had an objective referent. Ethical relativism has led to the teaching in our schools of a "value-free" morality, which is somewhat of a contradiction in terms. The traditional concepts of "shame" and "guilt," which were used to keep destructive human actions in line, have virtually disappeared from our culture. **The "feel-good" concept of moral action has taken over and is widely promoted by government programs, educational curricula, and the psychological industry.**

* What direct "moral" teaching has been introduced into the curriculum of our public schools has come under the guise of "values-clarification" or "moral reasoning." Neither of these assumes any fundamental objective principle of morality or any universal standard by which to determine what is "right behavior" and what is not. This type of curriculum leads to a "do your own thing" ethics or a "nothing is really right or wrong, but thinking makes it so" moral attitude. **Furthermore, like it or not, our youth are not in a position to make moral decisions without having some prior standards to use in making those decisions.** This is a major fault in the "value-free" concept of moral education.

* **Education is not enough to change human behavior.** This should be patently obvious to anyone. "Knowing" that something is right or wrong does not by itself lead one to proper or appropriate behavior. If education is all that was needed, we should not have tobacco smokers, alcoholics, drug addicts, or child abusers. It is not enough to "know" that a behavior is wrong or harmful; it is also necessary to "practice" a good behavior. It needs to become a "habit." This is the training component of any realistic moral education.

* **Ethical relativism also seems to have led to other problems associated with the general cultural decline we see today.** It apparently has undermined a sense of "authority," "duty," and "responsibility" so essential to social order. It has virtually done away with the concepts of shame and guilt as applied to human actions. It has created a false concept of "self-esteem" and made "self-acceptance" a static, rather than dynamic, quality, one that leads to continuing personal improvement. It has also turned the concept of "tolerance" on its head, making acceptance of any behavior, no matter how outrageous, acceptable. If "anything goes," then anything goes and nothing can be deemed immoral nor can any behavior be morally condemned. According to ethical relativism, there are no objective standards by which to judge.

* **Even though ethical relativism has had a tremendous influence on American culture, it is a moral philosophy that cannot be lived.** It sounds good on the surface but it's based on nothing objectively definable. It is a moral philosophy that lives only in books and is discussed only in classrooms. **In the real world, ethical relativism does not and cannot work.**

If there are no objective principles of morality, by what standard do we judge Adolf Hitler's actions to be immoral, unethical, or "wrong," as long as Germany had a human-made statutory law permitting such policies as were practiced against the Jews and others. How can we speak of universal "human rights" without reference to some objective, absolute principles of moral behavior? If all moral principles are relative, why isn't my opinion that some human beings don't have "rights" and can therefore be tortured and murdered, just as good as the next guys?

A world that actually accepted and operated on the basis of true moral relativism would be chaotic. There would be nothing objectively right or wrong and there would be no distinction between a

virtue and a vice; one's opinion about the morality of an action would be all that mattered. This is why moral relativism cannot be lived.

A Proposed Solution to the Problem

Political, economic, and social policies have not and cannot solve the anti-social behavior problems we face today in our culture. Education by itself is not the answer either. It is one part of the solution but not the solution itself.

There are at least four components to a total program of moral education: knowledge, attitude, practice, and enforcement.

Knowledge is the beginning and that means teaching the difference between right and wrong, or good and bad, behavior. This teaching can only be based on objective moral principles, universally valid.

Attitude is the next step in the process. A positive attitude toward moral principles and their application to living is necessary. Acceptance of objective moral principles is vital to the process of abiding by them and using them to make decisions about right behavior in any situation.

Practicing good behaviors is also part of the process. It is through practice that the application of moral principles to behavior is internalized and capable of future application.

Enforcement of good behaviors and **punishment** of bad behaviors is also part of the educative process in moral matters. Enforcement may be through the use of legal sanctions in some cases and informal social sanctions in others depending on the specific behavior. The concept of "conscience" plays a part here, a concept that has been dismissed as an anachronism during the past three decades. **The concepts of "discipline" and "self-discipline" also are important here.**

The solution to the cultural disintegration we are experiencing today is to return to the basic moral principles which time and experience have shown to be true and necessary for a civilized people and to those virtues and values which follow necessarily from those fundamental principles. These basic moral principles must also be applied to today's challenges.

There are plenty of "think-tanks" in America devoted to political, economic, and social concerns. Some of these have specific agendas such as tax reform or some other pressing problem. Many of these groups are foundations or institutes that are tax-exempt. Their purpose is mainly to do research and issue policy statements. In some cases they may recommend changes in public policies.

There is no doubt that political, economic, and social policies are important. For the most part, however, these policies deal with the "materialistic" concerns of society. **The fact is, however, that the primary "cause" of the decline in "good" and "right" human behavior is not one of political, economic, or social dimensions; it is one of moral education and the practice of moral behavior.**

In other words, and it is realized that this view is not popular today, **the problem we face in our American culture is not primarily a "materialistic" one but a "spiritual" one.** It must be understood here that the term "spiritual" is not being used in any specific religious sense, but refers to those fundamental principles of human behavior which determine and/or justify the goodness or rightness of any human act.

Many people think that the solution to our current cultural ills is simply to spend more money trying to solve the social problems we have. This has been tried for over three decades without success. In fact the problems appear to be getting worse, not better. **This is really an attempt to solve what is basically a "spiritual" problem with a "materialistic" solution.**

The same can be said about programs supporting stricter crime legislation, greater punishment for anti-social behavior, and constructing more and larger prisons. This again is the attempt to solve a "spiritual" problem with a "materialistic" solution. These programs so far have resulted in more criminals, harsher punishments, and tremendous outlays for the building of more and more prisons; they have not, however, resulted in less crime, less anti-social behavior, or a "kinder and gentler" society.

We must stop looking for materialistic solutions to what is really a spiritual problem. Again, the basic problem is not one related to political and economic ends and means; there is no political or economic solution. **It is a problem of proper moral education and practice; and it requires a moral solution.** 📖

My good friend and colleague Dr. Jonathan Dolhenty is president of the Center for Applied Philosophy, which he describes as a think-tank in cyberspace, and webmaster of The Radical Academy website, a discussion of philosophy, politics, and the human condition. He spent over seventeen years in the field of education as a



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